

More Evidence Linking JNA to Ovcara

Author: [Goran Jungwirth](#)

Witness says Yugoslav army present at every stage of the transfer of Croats to site of Vukovar killings. A prosecution witness, known only as P-009 to protect his identity, confirmed this week that he saw one of the accused in the so-called Vukovar Three case, major Veselin Šljivančanin, inside Vukovar hospital, as well as at Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, barracks and the hangar at Ovčara – all three locations through which at least 264 Croats passed on their way to being executed by Serbian forces, according to the indictment.

Šljivančanin, says the prosecutor, handled the evacuation of Croats from Vukovar hospital, following the fall of the town to Serb forces in November 1991, alongside his subordinate and fellow accused Miroslav Radić. They were both following the orders of the third accused, Mile Mrkšić.

The three JNA officers are accused of responsibility for the massacre of 264 Croats at the farm in Ovčara following the JNA takeover of Vukovar in November 1991, after three months of heavy fighting.

The protected witness testified in English – possibly because he is now living abroad. P-009 lived in Vukovar until he fled the harassment of Croatian paramilitaries because he had a Serbian mother. On one occasion, before the conflict had started, he was kidnapped by Croats and heavily beaten. His family was bombarded by constant telephone threats.

“When it was getting darker you wouldn't go out,” the witness told the court, describing the situation during the siege of Vukovar. “It wasn't safe for you to go anywhere and we heard scary stories about events that are taking place. Lots of paramilitaries circled around.”

In July 1991 the witness went to Belgrade after the situation became even tenser following the killing of Croatian policemen by Serbs in the Vukovar suburb of Borovo Selo.

On arrival in Serbia, the witness tried to escape military conscription, but was caught and taken to a JNA camp. After being drafted he was send back to the Vukovar area, but now as Serbian soldier.

After a part of the witness testimony was given in closed session, the witness described how he was later beaten by JNA soldiers at the Velepromet prison camp, where Croats were being held.

But one of the witness' friends, named only as “B”, took him out of Velepromet and brought him to B's house.

When the JNA entered Vukovar on November 19, 1991, the witness went along with B, dressed in Serbian Territorial Defence, TO, uniforms to try to find B's parents, who had been living close to the hospital.

In some houses they found terrible scenes of bodies lying around. “In one house there were around 20 to 30 [corpses] covered with white sheets, and in the other even more, mostly men,” he described.

According to the witness, the hospital was guarded by JNA's military police, who did not allow anyone to enter, while all events were being monitored by Šljivančanin. Outside, angry masses of local Serbs were shouting that they wanted to enter and kill Croats.

The protected witness described how he and B followed the convoy of buses filled with captured Croats who were taken from the hospital.

At the JNA barracks, he saw TO members pulling two brothers out of one of the buses. After being beaten, they were driven to an unknown destination, along with third brother. All three are still listed as missing.

The witness confirmed that he saw the TO's commanders in the barracks arguing with Šljivančanin and other JNA officers.

When one bus went towards Ovčara, the witness said he and B followed it in the car. He said they saw prisoners being heavily beaten and robbed as they exited the bus. "They [Serbian soldiers].... hit them with everything they had -rifles, pipes, sticks, crutches, feet," he said.

The witness met and greeted Šljivančanin in front of a hangar, in which around 300 hundred prisoners sat on the floor.

When B tried to save 15 people from inside, three Serbian soldiers stopped him threatening to kill him, while yelling "this is not Velepromet", referring to prison camp where Croats were also being held.

One JNA officer intervened, and the witness, together with B managed to save five prisoners, pulling them out of the hangar one by one. Those people were then brought back to Velepromet for further "investigation".

The witness stayed in Vukovar until November 23 and continued to hear stories about "how everyone on Ovčara was killed". He then moved to Bijeljina in Bosnia and Hercegovina, afraid to come back to Vukovar, because of the threats he had experienced at Ovčara.

The defence counsels concentrated their cross-examinations on the part of protected witness's testimony where he described his mistreatment, before he left Vukovar the first time, by Croat paramilitaries. They wanted to use his evidence to support their thesis that the JNA attack on Vukovar was in response to the harassment of Croatian Serbs by Croats. The witness was unable to confirm who exactly kidnapped him, explaining that he was unable to recognise them.

But he repeated their words, that "Chetniks (Serb royalist soldiers accused of collaborating with the Nazis) should leave here [Vukovar]", and how the town would become part of a "Greater Croatia", a reference to the borders of the Croatian puppet state which existed during the Second World War.

Earlier in the week, one of the survivors, who had been rescued from the hangar at Ovčara, Emil Čakalić, also confirmed that JNA officers had been present there. The defence has been arguing that the JNA had no control over the actions of Serbian paramilitary units on which the defence wants to transfer the blame for

the mass killings.

Čakalić described how a few prisoners taken from Ovčara were further mistreated and killed when returned to Velepomet. Those who survived were transported after few days to a prison Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia where their suffering continued until they were exchanged in 1992 and transported to Croatia.

During cross-examination by the defence, Čakalić confirmed that members of one of the armed groups operating in the city, known "city defenders", came to the hospital after Vukovar's defences collapsed. They dressed up as medical personnel trying to hide from JNA, said Čakalić, but he concluded, "in the end that cost their heads".

The defence seized cited this testimony as confirmation of their argument that separating and interrogating Croats hiding in the hospital had been necessary, in order to find out if civilians and wounded "were hiding active military soldiers".

The trial continues next week with the testimony of a prosecution witness.

Goran Jungvirth is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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